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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 007272

SIPDIS

PACAF FOR GENERAL HESTER
PACOM FOR FPA HUSO

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TAGS: [OVIP](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [MASS](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR PACAF COMMANDER GEN HESTER'S VISIT
TO THAILAND

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce. Reason 1.4 (a and d)

11. (C) General Hester, all of us in Bangkok look forward to your visit as an opportunity to advance a number of key U.S. foreign policy objectives. The Thai will likely ask you for your latest thinking on the future of our annual Cope Tiger Exercise. In addition to promoting issues directly affecting the Royal Thai Air Force such as their pending decision to replace aging F-5's, you can urge the Thai to work with us to enhance our ability to monitor ship traffic in the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand and to share views on China and India's growing influence in the region. You may wish to express appreciation for Thailand continuing to let us use the air field and support facilities at the Utapao Royal Thai Navy Air Base and should be prepared to field questions about our willingness to provide safety upgrades there. Thailand is a key ally in the Global War on Terror and senior officials will welcome your views on this subject as well as developments in Iraq and Afghanistan. They will likely share opinions on Thailand's largest domestic challenge -- unrest in the predominantly Muslim provinces of southernmost Thailand. End Summary

THE BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

12. (C) Bilateral relations with Thailand are very good. The goodwill generated by America's quick and massive response to the December 26, 2004 tsunami is palpable. American businesses have over \$20 billion in direct investment in Thailand. The United States is Thailand's largest export market and its second-largest foreign investor.

13. (C) Nonetheless, there are several points of friction. Human rights remain a key concern. The State Department's annual Human Rights Report cited the October 25, 2004 Tak Bai incident, during which poorly trained Thai military and civilian security forces forced nearly 1,300 Thai Muslim protesters into trucks to be transported to a military base nearly three hours away. 78 protesters died en route. In response, JUSMAGTHAI has offered a comprehensive series of human rights courses administered by the Defense Institute of International Legal Studies (DIILS) for Thai officers and soldiers rotating to southern Thailand. In early 2006, the USMC will administer a series of non-lethal weapons training courses for Thai soldiers as well.

14. (C) Thailand's policy of "constructive engagement" with the military junta in Burma and provision of economic assistance to Rangoon is a source of continuing frustration for us. The Thai government supports democracy in Burma but maintains, not altogether convincingly, that engagement with the SPDC is the only realistic approach it has to make progress on the major cross-border flows of refugees, illegal economic migrants, and methamphetamines it faces from Burma. Recently PM Thaksin has voiced growing frustration with Rangoon and his Ministers tell us that the Thai may be willing to be more critical, publicly, of the junta.

PM THAKSIN

15. (SBU) In 2001, Thaksin became the first democratically elected civilian Prime Minister to win an outright majority in the Thai Parliament. Thaksin won reelection in a landslide victory on February 6. His Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love Thais) political party dominates domestic politics and controls 375 of the 500 seats in Parliament. Thaksin comes from a prosperous Sino-Thai family in Thailand's second largest city, Chiang Mai, and placed first in his class at the National Police Academy. He spent several years studying in the United States, earning a master's degree in Criminal Justice from Eastern Kentucky University and a Doctorate in Criminology from Sam Houston State University. After a few years with the police, he left government service to run the family business (Shinawatra Corporation, or Shin Corp), which he turned into Thailand's largest telecom company, making himself a multi-billionaire.

16. (C) Thaksin considers himself a personal friend of the President, drawing on their common Texas connections, and had a very successful meeting with President Bush on September 19 in Washington. They also met at the recently concluded APEC Leaders Meeting in Busan, South Korea. The PM characterizes

himself as a "CEO Prime Minister" and likes to be known for being decisive. He is also impulsive. His critics accuse him of authoritarian tendencies, of staffing the major institutions of the country with his family members or classmates, and of reinforcing the business interests of family and political allies through government policies.

MILITARY COOPERATION

17. (C) Perhaps because of its lack of a colonial heritage the Thai are more open to cooperation with other countries than many of their neighbors. The Thai give us greater latitude in conducting military exercises than most other countries in the region. We conduct a wide range of major exercises and training programs with Thailand each year, including Cobra Gold, our only joint/combined/multilateral exercise in the Asia Pacific Region. Cobra Gold 2006 will be the 25th year we have held the exercise. Over the past 25 years, the exercise has transformed from a bilateral effort aimed at training to deter a conventional attack from Vietnam, to a multilateral exercise aimed at enhancing peacekeeping and other skills. Cobra Gold 2006 will include participation by Japan, Singapore, and Indonesia and will have a special focus on Peace Keeping and Peace Enforcement operations. Thailand has been selected to be a key partner nation in the Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI) -- a G-8 program aimed to train 15,000 peacekeepers in the Asia-Pacific region by 2010. Cobra Gold in 2007 will be a GPOI capstone event.

COPE TIGER

18. (C) Our premier air force exercise with Thailand is Cope Tiger. RTAF officials disagree with our suggestion to combine Cope Tiger with Cobra Gold. During the November 7-8 U.S.-Thailand Strategic Dialogue, Air Vice Marshal Ittaphorn Subhawong, Director of Operations for the RTAF, said that the RTAF views Cope Tiger as instrumental in improving Thai air capabilities and that it was important to maintain Cope Tiger as a separate entity not focused on PKO like Cobra Gold. At that time, BrigGen John Allen from OSD/ISA cautioned no final decision about consolidating the two exercises had been made and promised to relay the RTAF concerns to the appropriate authorities. In asides, RTAF officials have told us that they will not agree to move Cope Tiger and will plan to hold the exercise bilaterally with Singapore, or even invite a third country, if we insist on moving it. RTAF officials will be very interested in hearing any update about our plans.

UTAPAO UPGRADES

19. (C) PACOM experts recently characterized the Thai Naval Air Base at Utapao as our most important Cooperative Security Location (CSL) in the theater. Due to Thai concerns about the term "CSL" we suggest you not use it when discussing Utapao. Nonetheless, it would be entirely proper for you to thank the Thai for allowing us to use Utapao as the hub for military assistance during Operation Unified Assistance and for their continued willingness to permit us to use it for U.S. aircraft transiting the region. Thai officers and U.S. officials in country agree that Utapao needs some safety upgrades in order to continue to be of use to us. In September, a PACAF assessment team visited Utapao to determine what systems need enhancement or upgrading. During the Strategic Dialogue, Rear Admiral Narongpol Na Bangchang of the Royal Thai Navy asked about the Utapao survey led by PACAF and the likelihood of Thailand receiving U.S. funded upgrades. He was told at that time that the report was still being compiled and that it would be released shortly.

F-16 SALE

10. (C) Thailand recently announced its plans to replace aging F-5s in the RTAF fleet. Although the RTAF presently has 59 F-16s in its inventory, reports six months ago indicated that the RTG was leaning towards purchasing Saab Gripen or SU-30s because of a belief (which we have worked to overcome) that Saab or Sukhoi could offer a better business deal to Thailand. We have worked hard with Washington to ensure that Secretary Rumsfeld, Secretary Rice and the President all urged Thailand to either use its defense budget to upgrade its existing F-16s or to buy F-16 Block 52s. Most reports we have received lately indicate the Thai will now perform about 400 million USD worth of Mid-Life Upgrades (MLUs) on its F-16s. However, we still hear persistent rumors that Thailand may make a token purchase of either SU-30's or Saabs to curry political favor with Russia or Sweden. It would be entirely appropriate for you to ask your interlocutors for the latest information on the sale and to repeat the President's strongly expressed desire to PM Thaksin that Thailand purchase either MLUs or Block 52s.

THE ROLE OF CHINA AND INDIA IN THE REGION

11. (C) Southeast Asia is experiencing a period of dynamic

change in part due to the rising influence of China and India in the region. While emphasizing the vital role of the U.S. in the region -- and Thailand's desire to intensify U.S. engagement -- Thai leaders also focus on developing stronger relations with the two regional powers. Bangkok views both countries as sources of unlimited consumer demand and hope to conclude Free Trade Agreements with both nations. Some see Thailand playing a bridging role between the U.S. and China and India. Given PACAF's recent participation in Cope India and your knowledge of the capabilities of the People's Liberation Air Force, it would be worthwhile for you to share views on the future roles of India and China.

MARITIME SECURITY

12. (C) Thailand is now cooperating with many countries in the region to monitor maritime traffic in the Andaman Sea and the South China Sea, including joint maritime patrols with Vietnam and Malaysia. The Thai are also observers in the "Eyes in the Sky" (EITS) program. Implemented in September, EITS seeks to mobilize the combined resources of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore to maintain maritime security in the Strait of Malacca. In practice, EITS is of limited utility because it only involves token patrol flights by one plane each from Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. The Thai briefed us recently on an Indonesian proposal to set up ship patrols coupled with reporting stations in the region to be part of a "Combined Maritime Patrol" architecture. This architecture would be multi-national and interagency -- running in parallel with EITS -- and would divide the Strait into five reporting zones, with reporting stations in Phuket (Thailand), Lumut and Sabang (Indonesia), Dumai (Malaysia) and Changi (Singapore). Although there would be no single command and control center, each country would receive a full activity report from all sectors. The Thai have explained that this project is currently in the "working-group" stage and the Thai side did not know when it would be implemented. Nonetheless, our experts believe that such an architecture could provide tactical feed from all of the stations into a Thai-U.S. Maritime Operations Intelligence Fusion capability, now in the planning stages. Time permitting, it would be useful to hear Thai views on both EITS and maritime security generally to determine whether we have opportunities to work together in this area.

COUNTERTERRORISM AND SOUTHERN THAILAND

13. (C) Prime Minister Thaksin's biggest domestic challenge is the unsettled security situation in the far southern part of the country. Southern Thailand, in particular the southernmost Muslim majority provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, has experienced episodic violence since it was incorporated into the Siamese Kingdom in 1902. However, since January 2004, we have witnessed a dramatic increase in the level of violence. Press reports indicate that over 1,000 persons have been killed either by militants or by security forces during this period. Local Muslim separatist militants have attacked symbols of Thai and Buddhist authority, Buddhist civilians, and Muslims suspected of collaborating with the Government. There continue to be daily incidents of violence. In March 2005, Thaksin appointed a National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) headed by highly respected former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun to look for alternative solutions to the long-running insurgency. The NRC is expected to present its findings in early 2006.

14. (C) Thai officials may ask you for U.S. equipment and technology such as UAVs to support efforts to monitor militant movements in the South. We recommend you be receptive but noncommittal, and suggest that technical experts follow up. You may also wish to point to our current efforts to improve human rights training for Thai soldiers and officers who will rotate to the South. There are widely circulated rumors among the ethnic Malay Muslims that the U.S. has fomented the violence in the South in order to justify a U.S. security presence there. This has made the RTG very sensitive about any visible U.S. assistance aimed at the South. You should be aware of these concerns when discussing offers of possible U.S. assistance.

PROLIFERATION SECURITY INITIATIVE (PSI)

15. (C) After a year and a half of lobbying from the U.S. and others, Thailand has still not endorsed the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) Statement of Interdiction Principles (SOP). PM Thaksin has told us that he is reluctant to endorse PSI until another Muslim ASEAN state does so. This key U.S. objective has been raised with senior Thai officials by the President, Secretary Rice and Secretary Rumsfeld. It would be helpful for you to underscore the importance of PSI with your interlocutors perhaps by advising them that endorsement will allow us jointly to conduct a number of exercises and seminars to stop proliferation.

WE LOOK FORWARD TO YOUR VISIT

16. (U) I look forward to your visit and to discussing the broad range of our mutual interests.

BOYCE